

Pattern and Behavioural Approach to Fraudulent Practices in the Informal Economic Setting

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Abstract

The experience of consumers in recent times has been described in various studies as disastrous and one that portends serious danger to the safety of human life. The frequently reported cases were those that pertained to agricultural food items. It is amusing that consumption of these products that ought to complement nutrient in human life has become source of discomfort and health hazard. Coupled with this was the case of fraudulent practices which were reported as rampant within the traders in public markets. In spite of this, such cases were not given the kind of adequate attention that they deserved by scholars. This study therefore emerged as a response to this with objectives of interrogating the experiences of the victims of this anomaly through the dimension that the fraudulent practices was taking and the management approach being adopted to address it. The study is descriptive in nature: a total of 28 respondents comprising consumers, foodstuff sellers and officials of Foodstuff Sellers Association were involved in the study. Both purposive and snowball sampling procedures were used to reach out to these respondents. Interview guide was the major instrument used to source for data from the respondents in the course of in-depth and key informant interview sessions. All the consumers engaged as respondents here as well as some sellers acknowledged the existence of fraudulent practices within Bodija Market, Ibadan. The common fraudulent practices within this market, according to the findings of this study, included measurement cheat, hoarding of goods and mixture of the products with bad/diseased variety. Only a few of the victims of the fraud reported the matter to the officials of the Market. Measures adopted by the respondents to counter the fraudulent practices include extensive consultation with other consumers who patronized the market over the credibility of the sellers and their wares. There are consumers who go about with their measurement modules (kongo) while in the market to make purchases; this category of people will not buy from any seller except those that allowed the usage of the consumers' module alone. Recommendations presented emanated from the respondents and were in line with the findings of the study.

Keywords: Consumers, Food Stuff, Fraudulent Practices, Kongo, Sellers.

INTRODUCTION

Though social exchange may differ in forms, it is something that takes place in every society based on rule or trust. Some could be monetary, via business activities, while others could be non-monetary, reflecting service free activities in human interaction. Social exchange takes place both in formal and informal settings. This work, therefore, is an attempt to complement the existing scholarship on monetary aspect of social exchange within the informal setting. This becomes necessary in view of its implication for the moral fabric of society and the sustenance of living. Unethical behaviour, which is precursor to fraud and criminality (Rossouw and Arkhuysn, 2000) can be destructive where no proactive action is taken and may lead to collapse of the entire system. Academic discourse on corruption and/or fraud is not a new phenomenon in the country; the phenomena have attracted the attention of scholars (Anifowose, 2002, Ibrahim, 2003, Aluko, 2002, Nwabueze, 2002, Olaopa, 1998, Maduagwu, 1996, Akindele, 1995) over the years. Though the two concepts (fraud and corruption) are often used interchangeably, there is a need to make a distinction between them, at least for the sake of clarity and for better appreciation of their import in the present study. Corruption is mostly associated with public sector and public officials; for example Joubert (1993) defined corruption as the practice of misuse of public positions. Contrary to this view, Rossouw and Arkhuysn (2000) are of the view that fraud is a phenomenon that is not limited to the public sector. They maintained that public officials, any employee or even outsiders, can be perpetrators of fraud. In view of this, the distinction between corruption and fraud is that corruption implies a third party involvement while fraud does not necessarily imply third-party involvement. In the case of corruption, employees violate duty to principals, they abuse their positions by either accepting or demanding a bribe offered by or demanded from a third party (Coleman, 1989). Though the study of fraud and corruption within the society is often considered attractive, academic investigation of these phenomena has been limited substantially to the formal sector of the economy.

The thrust of this study, therefore, is the fraudulent practices in the informal sector particularly among traders/sellers of household consumption items (food stuffs) like rice, beans, salt, palm/groundnut oil to mention but a few. The need for criminological focus of this aspect of the economy was based on its importance to human life. Many consumers of the above mentioned essential materials have been noted to have suffered

varying degree of cheating, damages, and shortchanging in the hands of numerous unscrupulous sellers or distributors (NAFDAC, 2008). In spite of this, adequate scholarly effort has not been given to the activities of players within the informal market sector. This work, therefore, explores the experience of victims of fraudulent practices in the informal economic setting, specifically Bodija Market, in Ibadan. Other areas of interest are the pattern and the behavioural approach towards the practices by the stakeholders (the buyers and sellers within the market).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative approach, where in-depth interview and key informant interview were used to collect the data. The study area is Bodija market in Ibadan. The selection of the market was based on the researchers' familiarity with the market and to make the process of data collection less difficult. The study population here included the foodstuff sellers and the officials of foodstuff sellers association. These were purposively selected, while the consumers (specifically, those who have been victims of fraudulent practices in the market) were selected from various settings through snowball approach. The sellers and the buyers were engaged in in-depth interview; the officials of foodstuff sellers association were involved as key informants. The data collected were content analyzed. The results were presented with quotations from respondents to support the issues being expressed. In line with ethical standard, approval was obtained from the market union where the central goal and benefits associated with the study were highlighted. The purpose of this study, which is purely academic, was further disclosed to the respondents in order to encourage responses. Every action taken in this regard was based on consent of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The consumers and sellers cut across educated and non-educated participants. Data showed that they were residents of Ibadan North Local Government Area (LGA) of Oyo State. Female respondents constituted the majority of the study population. The breakdown of the study population across the social relation in this study, based on gender status and instrument used was illustrated in the table below.

Instrument Adopted, Social and Gender status of the Respondents

Respondents (Social Relation)	Gender Status and Instrument Used		
	Male	Female	Instrument
Foodstuff Sellers	4	8	IDI
Consumers	-	16	IDI
Foodstuff Association officials	4	4	KII
Total	8	28	

Most of the respondents confirmed the existence of fraudulent practices among the sellers within Bodija market, Ibadan. They further revealed that this was not peculiar to Bodija market alone; they revealed that the practices were obtainable in virtually all the markets across the country. The data further revealed the common fraudulent practices within this market; these include measurement cheat, hoarding of goods and mixture of the products with bad/diseased variety.

Experience of fraudulent Practices

Among the respondents who were buyers/consumers, the range of food items mostly consumed and purchased by these respondents includes beans, rice, yam/cassava flour, cooking ingredients, and all kinds of agricultural products. However, beans constituted the constantly cited type of food where the victims reported experiences of fraudulent practices. For instance, a respondent reported that:

We bought our household needs, especially foodstuff, on monthly basis; though we used to buy our needs in bulk, but things have changed since my husband was transferred to the far North. With all my children in tertiary institutions far away from our home, I've resorted to purchasing of what is needed for the use of just my last born (an eight years old girl) and I. It was through this that I realized the experience of people who go to market for retail services. My sudden desire for beans actually showed the dimension the traders can go to in order to shortchange their customers (Female IDI, Consumer/53 years old/Orogun area, Ibadan North LGA).

A similar case revealed further that:

Beans formed parts of my family menu. We always included beans as protein supplement of starchy foods that the kids usually preferred. However, this aspect of food stuff is equally a controversial one; it is either you are buying beans that have been infected by weevils or the one later certified as unfit for public consumption due to purported killing of innocent souls, still we cannot do without beans (Female IDI, Consumer/39 years old/Sango area, Ibadan North LGA).

Other perspective was:

Though people usually make reference to beans when relieving their experiences of fraudulent practices in the market; however my first experience of this practice was on vegetable oil and frozen chickens. The vegetable oil was adulterated with other element that could not be ascertained. It was from the nauseating smell it was giving when frying with it and while tasting it that I knew I've been swindled. The chicken on the other hand was of poor quality and taste. I was very bad about this, but I console myself and decided against going to that market for such items again. Though I've not experienced such occurrence again but I only go to that market for 'unprocessed yam flour'. Also I don't just go the market for the sake of it, I patronize only those who have been tested, trusted and certified by other people. In spite of this, I still don't feel satisfied with this until I've obtained verbal warranty on the items purchased before going away (Female IDI, Consumer/41 years old/Agbowo area, Ibadan North LGA).

Pattern of fraudulent practices

Data showed that these fraudulent practices usually take different patterns depending on the situation, the environment and the nature of goods bought in the market. Such practices range from tampering with measurement module (kongo), short-changing people through prices, adulteration of products (mixing with 'foreign' products) for extra gains to offering substandard products for sale. A respondent revealed that:

I once bought yam flour that was mixed with another substance, which was not noticeable at the point of sale. All my children including myself ate the yam flour and excessively passed excreta.

We were all admitted into a government hospital. The money I spent for treatment was very exorbitant (Female IDI, Consumer/52 years old/Samanda area, Ibadan North LGA).

Another pattern or method by which the act of dishonesty was perpetrated by the sellers, according to the consumers, was captured thus:

.....personal enquiry showed that these sellers engaged in the act of boiling the measurement module (kongo) in hot water in order to reduce the size. Some engaged in cutting off the edge of the kongo. At times, some sellers measure the beans quickly in order to short-change consumer. Some manufacturers equally assist sellers to produce smaller size of kongo which does not measure up to the original size (Female IDI, Consumer/35 years old/Barika area, Ibadan North LGA).

Some sellers also confirmed the existence of fraudulent practices within the market. They, however, classified those involved in the act as 'unprincipled elements' within their ranks. In the words of one of them:

We cannot dispute that some sellers are dishonest, particularly those that sell beans, rice, yam flour, cassava powder and other agricultural items. We are aware that some of them mix yam flour with other substance; they engage in cutting off the edge of their Kongos. The beans seller for example may sell wrong type of beans if the buyers are not vigilant. For instance, we have different types of beans that we sell. It differs according to prices, however, some sellers do deceive unsuspecting buyers by selling low quality beans at high price (Male IDI, Sellers/47 years old/Bodija Market, Ibadan North LGA).

While reacting to this, a respondent traced the cause of such practices to poverty and related problems. According to her:

High level of poverty in the land accounted for this; it has affected the thinking of every person including the sellers. People are increasingly becoming greedy; they want to get rich quickly. High level of illiteracy among sellers is making them to lose knowledge of ethics in business. The mentality of abnormal profit is a major problem. There is lack of government agency monitoring of market to maintain standard. Transportation cannot be exempted from the cause (Female IDI, Seller/56 years old/Bodija Market North LGA).

The Behavioural Approach of the Stakeholders

Some of the victims revealed that they did not bother to take action over the incidents. A number of reasons were given for their refusal to report the matter to the appropriate quarters. Part of the reasons presented by one of the respondents was:

I do not bother to report because I am always busy. Time does not permit. For me, I often suspect the fraud, but I decided to leave everything to God. If you report to them (sellers), they will never agree because I have heard of somebody in similar situation who reported similar issues (though not as dangerous as what happened to me and my family) who was roundly embarrassed. At times the sellers may turn the issue to fighting if one is not careful (Female IDI, Consumer/48 years old/Abadina Community, University of Ibadan, Ibadan North LGA).

On the other hand, the officials of the Foodstuff Sellers Association within the market revealed that they have received complaints about this and have handled such cases appropriately on a number of occasions. They were somehow bitter over the failure of the victims to report such cases. In regard of this, a respondent revealed that:

There are cases of members apprehended over this matter. We engaged in thorough investigation of the matter to ensure that no party is unfairly dealt with especially the consumers who for long have remained our pillar of strength. Without them we cannot operate, that is why we always ensure that their interests are well protected. At the same time, we know that failure to take action may lead to wrong accusation and blanket assessment of every member of our association as fraud (Male KII, Official of Foodstuff Sellers Association/62 years old/Bodija Market, Ibadan North LGA).

It was shown that many of their erring members have been severely punished, with the punishment ranging from payment of compensation to verbal apology. Further disciplinary action depended on whether the seller is a first or perpetual offender. Insight into this was further presented thus:

We've discovered that most of the time, the seller does not always intend to be evil. Their case was that they themselves were victims of fraudulent practices at the point of purchasing their goods from farmers or local middlemen. It was always while preparing their goods for sale here that they usually discover this problem; rather than bear this in good faith, the fear of suffering the financial consequence of this was the yardstick behind various sharp practices they involved themselves (Female KII, Official of Foodstuff Sellers Association/65 years old/Bodija Market, Ibadan North LGA).

Another official shed light on the circumstance that makes the sellers vulnerable as victims of bad products at the point of purchase from the farmers. In his words:

It is always a tug-of-war when looking for goods to purchase from the farmers/middlemen, and this is because the demand for foodstuffs is all the time higher than supply. All the sellers especially in the southern part of the country usually meet in the same destination. For instance we buy our goods/foodstuffs at Mokwa, Ibbi, Zugruma, Zungeru, etc in Niger State. When goods are brought from the rural areas to these market towns everybody will be scrambling to make a purchase out of these; there will be no room for checking whether the product being offered for sale are of high quality. In the course of trying to do this the fear of losing out to the aggressive buyers like those from Lagos who are ever ready to pay for everything will not make the need for the clarification of quality of these goods possible. Also one would not like to come all the way from Ibadan or wherever and return back empty handed without any purchase. However, this is not enough reason for one to become a cheat. It is not new to us, almost every one of us in the executive arm of this association have experienced such situation. My resolve is that one cannot be winning all the time; a day will come when one will recoup what one has lost. The main concern therefore should be how to maintain one's customers; this is only possible when the confidence being reposed in one by these customers is maintained through quality services (Male KII, Official of Foodstuff Sellers Association/56 years old/Bodija Market, Ibadan North LGA).

Another official was of the view that the consumers should share in the blame for being victims of this circumstance. According to her:

There are sellers that are veteran and unrepentant in the quest to make easy money by offering their goods for sale at odd times (like very early in the morning and later in the evening). In most cases, greediness and indecision make many consumers to fall victim of this group of people. The issue is that there is a limit to which we can operate as association because we are in democratic era. If one goes beyond the limit, one would only end up spending his/her hard-earned money on prosecution of unnecessary cases in the court of law (Female KII, Official of Foodstuff Sellers Association/62 years old/Bodija Market, Ibadan North LGA).

Adopted Measures for handling the Problem

In view of the 'mutual mistrust' created among the buyers about what the sellers have for sale, most of the respondents have resorted to extensive consultation about the credibility of the buyers they are about to transact business with beforehand. Some prefer to verify the religious background of the sellers as yardstick for ascertaining their reliability. Other consumers go to the market with their own measurement modules (Kongo) to avoid cheating. A respondent said:

I did not bother to waste my time by reporting to anybody or their union; the situation has gotten to a level that I used to see everybody in that market as devil incarnates. For almost six months, I avoided Bodija market until someone introduced a seller to me who was reputed to be born again as well as upright in her dealings within the market. Through her, I was able to know people of such reputation selling other kinds of thing I may need (Female IDI, Consumer/42 years old/Ashi-Bodija area, Ibadan North LGA).

Another respondent revealed that:

I make sure I buy my foodstuffs from the sellers who are elderly; not only this, I reckoned with

those who are found in a fairly large clusters. I have discovered that the elderly ones are full of experiences; they dislike insults and are always considerate in their dealings. When such people are in fairly large number, cheating is constantly checkmated (Female IDI, Consumer/39 years old/Bashorun area, Ibadan North LGA).

From another perspective, a respondent said:

I bought foodstuffs for my consumption and for sale, so I cannot do without Bodija market most especially since it is the only fairly large market that is very nearer to my house. What I do to checkmate sharp practices especially the measurement module is to come to the market with my own. The standard one introduced during the time when retired General Olurin was the Governor of Oyo (old) State is still in existence. I purchased my foodstuffs from the seller(s) who agreed to use my module only. There are those who would not want to hear of this and there are those who are willing and ready (Female IDI, Consumer/37 years old/Agbowo Express area, Ibadan North LGA).

Discussion

The scenario presented by the respondents showed that there was no working system by which complaint can be effectively presented to achieve positive results. The manifestation of this emerged from the fact that the perpetrators are unlikely ready to accept the negative implications of their acts or stop such criminal acts despite the fact that some victims/consumers did report these cases of fraud. A remark regarding the fear of spending hard-earned money to prosecute cases by those who did not report the cases is an indication of existence of financial incapability to channel their cases. It is also a manifestation of the fact that many poor Nigerians are always reluctant to initiate action against injustice done to them, hence the rigid belief that they cannot get redress. This, therefore, pointed to the need for the government to live up to its responsibility through its agencies, especially through Consumers Protection Council (CPC), by protecting and giving justice to the poor consumers.

The increasing problem of corruption in Nigeria is best understood through the observation of Makinde (2008) which he ex-rayed as occasioned by the dearth of thinkers. Though speaking from macro perspective, Makinde (2008) saw every human action (political, economic, social and moral) as preceded by human thought. The import of this is that all the evils militating against good governance are products of bad and depraved thoughts. Meanwhile, philosophical thinking always has direct positive bearings on integrity, selflessness, honesty, accountability, transparency and good governance. In relation to the findings of this study, it is obvious that the absence of clear-cut and effective policy or political will to ensure that the menace of corruption is curbed at macro level in Nigeria has provided a fertile ground for the same to breed and manifest at the micro level as obtained in an informal economic setting like Bodija Market, Ibadan. As a result of this, the principle of general happiness of the greatest number has been greedily and selfishly turned to that of the special happiness of the least number.

An affirmation of this is apparent through the fraudulent activities in the discharge of goods and services within the informal market environment like Bodija Market, Ibadan. While establishing the pervasiveness of corrupt practices in every segment of society, it also indicates the absence or a near total collapse of effective regulatory measures for ethical standard within the society. This has given rise to the tradition of mutual suspicion among the buyers and sellers in terms of the sincerity in appropriateness of measures being used in the market and practice of coming to the market with their own supposed 'perfect' measure is a manifestation of widespread mutual mistrust within the society. The attendant result of this is gradual destruction of patriotism, which in the long run will impact negatively on the developmental process of the country if allowed to continue unchecked. This, thus, corroborates the general observation that corruption is antithetical to good governance and is an affront to ethical principles. By this, it is obvious that we as a nation are yet to learn the principles on which societies must be founded for the citizenry to be happy.

The implication of this is the prevalence of dishonesty in social dealings. Also, the effects of this on agricultural items will have multiplier effects on the social and economic wellbeing of the country. Negative social effect will manifest in the sense that consumption of adulterated foodstuff means Nigerians are at high risk of health problems. Not only this, it will lead to a loss of interest in Nigerian agricultural products by the international community and drastic reduction in our export earnings. On the basis of this, there is need for all stakeholders comprising the government, sellers through their associations and even consumers to take proactive step towards the eradication of sharp practices being perpetrated on agricultural products if human society must be a better place to live in.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that corruption exists both at the formal and informal settings. Within the informal setting, the scope of corruption covers a wide array of areas including social, religious, economic and

political sphere. However, attention of scholars on corruption is heavily skewed towards the formal sector. In the informal setting, economic aspect has not been given adequate attention. This is apparent in the work of Labanji (1970) who defined corruption as having to do with bribery-money-giving and money taking to induce the receiver to carry out an action in favour of the giver who is not in fact entitled to the benefit of the action. But the inclusion of phenomenon like nepotism, cheating and deception makes little difference. Also, Akindele (1990) and Gibbon and Rowat (1976:17) are limited in their definitions of corruption within political perspectives and issues like election rigging and genocidal political techniques. Events going around in the society, especially the ones discovered within Bodija Market, Ibadan, lend credence to the observation that corruption is not limited only to asking, giving, taking gift or favour in exchange for the performance of illegitimate task; hoarding, collusive price-fixing, smuggling, transfer-pricing, inflation of prices, election rigging, illegal arrest for harassment or intimidation purposes; abuse/misuse of office, position or power, diversion of public (corporate or other person's) money or property to direct or indirect personal use, and so on as itemized by Odekunle (1987) and Olaopa (1998:19). The limiting of corruption to politics by Babalola (1995) and its description within law-making and law-implementation processes also showed how corruption is restricted to the informal and micro levels by various scholars with bias to social phenomenon. This study has justified the position of Crane and Dirk (2004) that business life is confronted with enormous and complex ethical problems. The study further revealed the various dimensions which unethical practices may take. The findings also corroborated the position of Rossouw and Arkhuysn (2000) that fraud and corruption traverse every facet of human endeavour and not necessarily phenomena that are peculiar to public sector and public officials.

Recommendations

In order to correct and uphold the level of confidence reposed in the sellers (which is seriously deteriorating), the respondents suggested ways by which prevailing fraud within the market could be addressed. These include:

- There is need for stability of the economy in order to fight fraud in the society.
- The foodstuffs sellers association should be empowered to mete out stiffer punishment to erring sellers.
- Cases were made for every buyer who comes to the market with his or her Kongo measurement and the need for an improved transportation system in order to reduce prices.
- They also stressed the need for education and enlightenment or workshop for sellers to uphold good ethics.
- The role of government through such agencies as CPC (Consumers Protection Council) cannot be overemphasized; the agency should be mandated to take cases in often neglected areas like Bodija market and the like into cognizance.
- Government should also reintroduce uniform measurement module which must be constantly inspected by government and union official.

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